

Grounding Discernment in Data: Strategic Missional Planning Using GIS Technology and Market Segmentation Data

Kenneth W. Howard,
The FaithX Project

***Abstract:** Taking Jesus' call to love our neighbors seriously requires engaging them in the neighborhoods where they live. However, neighborhoods are transforming demographically faster than ever before. If we can help congregations more quickly understand their neighborhoods, there is a much greater likelihood that they will grow to love them as they love themselves. The question before us is, how do we help faith communities and their leaders engage missional opportunities that are emerging from rapid population change? The goal of the FaithX Project is to make it possible for faith communities, their leaders, and the judicatories that support them to employ location intelligence and predictive analytics in order for them to discern emerging missional opportunities. FaithX then helps them to create effective missional strategies for engaging those opportunities by asking four essential questions: What is our neighborhood? Who are our neighbors? What are our neighborhood's issues and opportunities? What are our neighborhood's resources?*

***Keywords:** Strategic Missional Planning, GIS Technology, Market Segmentation Data, Neighborhoods, Neighborhood Missional Intelligence, Predictive Analytics*

Introduction

JESUS CALLS UPON THOSE of us who would follow him to love our neighbors as ourselves. By extension, this would mean that Jesus calls us collectively to love our neighborhoods and the people living in them as much as we love ourselves as faith communities.¹ The problem arises when we as faith communities fall out of love with our neighborhoods. This could be, in part, because we have grown fond of the little community we share within our own church buildings, but that strength of our fondness for each other becomes a source of exclusion to those who visit us from the communities outside our

¹ See for example, Matt. 5:43, 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31, 12:33; Luke 10:27; cf. Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; Lev. 19:18.

walls.² It is equally likely that our neighborhoods are changing so rapidly that simply knowing our neighborhoods on a personal level, let alone understanding them, becomes an increasingly insurmountable challenge.³

Indeed, our neighborhoods are changing faster than ever before. Neighborhoods that once experienced population shifts over several generations are now transforming demographically in less than a decade—virtually overnight in ecclesiastical terms.⁴ However, we can apply our understanding of this dynamic in reverse. If we can help congregations become familiar with their neighborhoods, there is a much greater likelihood that they will grow to love them as much as they love themselves. The question before us is, how do we help faith communities and their leaders engage the missional opportunities emerging from rapid population change?

We know from research and experience that data alone cannot change minds. Rather than review data objectively, and bring their beliefs about reality in line with observable fact, people tend to look for data that confirms what they already believe, a phenomenon known as the *confirmation bias*.⁵ In this day of increasing tribal division, this tendency is strengthened by our need to believe the same of the people we consider to be our friends and allies, a more intense form of confirmation bias that some call “my-side bias.” For some people and situations, their beliefs about “how the world works” quite literally prevents them from taking notice of discrepant data that contradicts

² See Darren M. Slade, “Religious Homophily and Biblicism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 16–17, 22–23 <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28>; Stephen M. Merino, “Religious Involvement and Bridging Social Ties: The Role of Congregational Participation,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 291–308, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.10>.

³ Cf. Barna Group, *2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015), <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/> and Gregory Smith, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁴ Joseph Cortright and Dillon Mahmoudi, *Neighborhood Change, 1970 to 2010: Transition and Growth in Urban High Poverty Neighborhoods* (Portland, OR: Impresa Consulting, 2014); Miriam Zuk et al., “Gentrification, Displacement, and the Role of Public Investment,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 33, no. 1 (2018): 31–44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0885412217716439>.

⁵ Hugo Mercier, “Confirmation Bias – Myside Bias,” in *Cognitive Illusions: Intriguing Phenomena in Judgement, Thinking and Memory*, 2nd ed., ed. Rüdiger Pohl (London: Psychology Press, 2016), 99–114, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315696935>.

(or conflicts) with their beliefs. They are fact resistant, sometimes to the point of suffering from data blindness.⁶

It will surprise no one that both the confirmation bias and my-side bias, along with accompanying fact resistance and data blindness, is especially strong among religionists, religious institutions, and their leaders.⁷ Religionists are, after all, especially attached to tradition, often preferring the old over the new. However, there are things that may help people overcome data blindness in order to change hearts, minds, and behaviors. Research has shown that data is more likely to result in change if recipients are able to attach personal meaning to hard data.⁸ We also know that the way people attach meaning to facts is by grounding information to some form of story or narrative, allowing them to see themselves in the data.⁹ In other words, it is possible to change people's minds, hearts, and real-world behaviors if we utilize an interactive, data-grounded story to communicate our message.

It was with this research in mind that the FaithX Project entered a collaborative relationship with Datastory to develop an interactive Geographic Information Systems (GIS) platform called MapDash™ (short for "Map Dashboard").¹⁰ FaithX's goal was to make it possible for faith communities,

⁶ R. Matthew Montoya, Robert S. Horton, and Jeffrey Kirchner, "Is Actual Similarity Necessary for Attraction? A Meta-Analysis of Actual and Perceived Similarity," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 25, no. 6 (2008): 889–922, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407508096700>; Adam D. Rennhoff and Mark F. Owens, "Competition and the Strategic Choices of Churches," *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 4, no. 3 (2012): 152–70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1928164>; Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226458106.001.0001>; Irene Scopelliti et al., "Bias Blind Spot: Structure, Measurement, and Consequences," *Management Science* 61, no. 10 (2015): 2468–86, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2014.2096>.

⁷ See for example, Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, "When Prophecy Fails," in *Extending Psychological Frontiers: Selected Works of Leon Festinger*, ed. Stanley Schachter and Michael Gazzaniga (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 258–69 and C. Daniel Batson, "Rational Processing or Rationalization? The Effect of Disconfirming Information on a Stated Religious Belief," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32, no. 1 (July 1975): 176–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076771>.

⁸ Leslie S. Greenberg, "Research on the Process of Change," *Psychotherapy Research* 1, no. 1 (2008): 3–16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10503309112331334011>.

⁹ Patricia Hill Bailey and Stephen Tilley, "Storytelling and the Interpretation of Meaning in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 38, no. 6 (2002): 574–83, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.02224.x>.

¹⁰ For more details, see Ken Howard, "MapDash for Faith Communities – Version 2.0," The FaithX Project, accessed July 27, 2019, <https://faithx.net/datastoryfx/> and Jeffrey

their leaders, and the judicatories that support them to employ location intelligence and predictive analytics to discern emerging missional opportunities before they fully develop, and then to create effective missional strategies for engaging those opportunities. The strategic missional assessment and planning approach that emerged from this collaboration is an iterative process that asks, and endeavors to answer, four initial questions:

1. What is Our Neighborhood? Defining likely membership area and likely ministry area.
2. Who are Our Neighbors? Learning about the demographic and lifestyle characteristics of the people who live in our membership and ministry areas.
3. What are Our Neighborhood's Issues and Opportunities? What are the challenges and the opportunities they face.
4. What are Our Neighborhood's Resources? What strengths and resources do our neighborhoods have to confront these issues.

What is Our Neighborhood?

A congregation's membership area and its ministry area seldom share the same boundaries. The former is the area from where the majority of their congregants will originate and is determined by how far the average person is willing to drive in order to reach a congregation or church. The latter is the area where a church or ministry has the least competition from a similar ministry or church in the same denomination, and thus its greatest influence.

Membership Area

FaithX's approach uses a congregation's fifteen-minute drive time boundary to define the congregation's membership area because research has shown that 70% of the American population will not drive longer than fifteen minutes to reach a place of worship, a figure that is surprisingly constant, whether its location is urban, suburban, or rural.¹¹

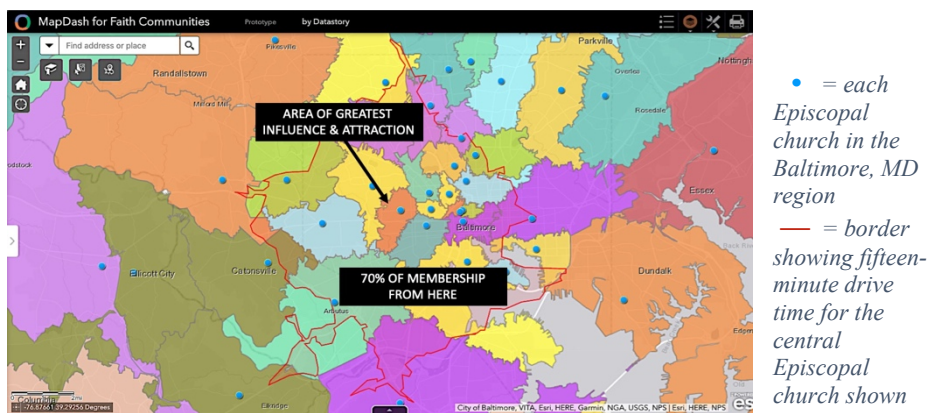
Peters, "Using Science to Find the Faithful," WhereNext, April 9, 2019, www.esri.com/about/newsroom/publications/wherenext/science-finds-faithful/.

¹¹ Kevin D. Dougherty, "Church Commuting," in *American Values, Mental Health, and Using Technology in the Age of Trump: Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey, Wave 5*,

Ministry Area

To determine a congregation's ministry area, FaithX employs a different kind of drive-time analysis: equidistant drive times between surrounding same-denomination congregations. The area within the resultant boundaries is the area of greatest influence. Sadly, as FaithX's field research has revealed, a church's greatest competitors are typically from the same denomination.¹² In other words, rather than one Episcopal church filled to capacity, two or more Episcopal churches compete for the same congregants, funding, even ministry agendas. Using Baltimore, Maryland as an example, Figure 1 below illustrates the difference between a congregation's ministry area (their region of greatest influence) and its drive-time membership area (from which the majority of their members will come). Figure 1 reveals that there are numerous Episcopal churches competing with each other for resources and members in just this one area, substantially diminishing each congregation's area of influence. With fewer congregations in this area, each church's area of influence could expand to impact more people.

Figure 1: Membership Area vs. Ministry Area (Baltimore, MD)



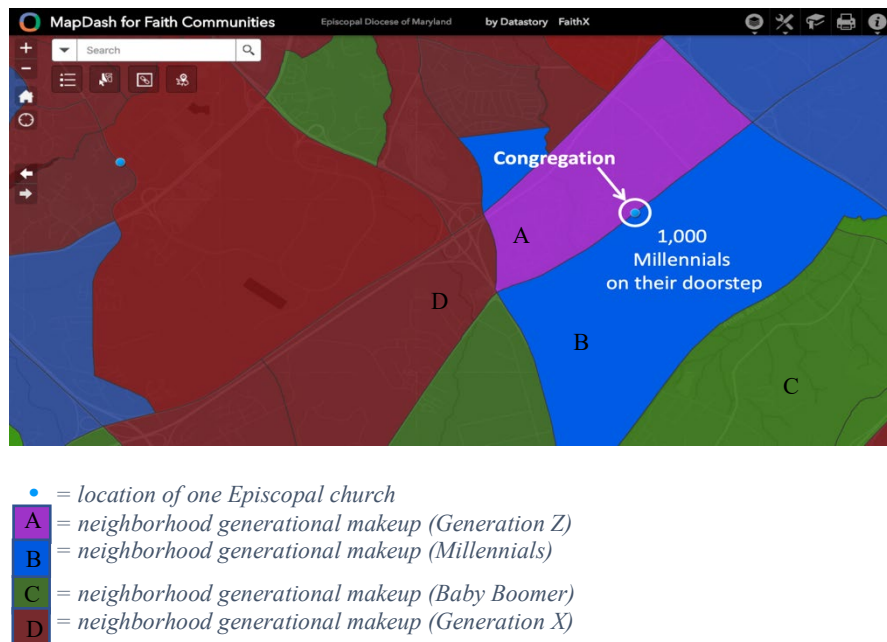
ed. Paul Froese et al. (Waco, TX: Baylor University, September 2017), 55–56,
<https://www.baylor.edu/baylorreligionsurvey/doc.php/292546.pdf>.

¹² Cf. Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner, "Is Actual Similarity Necessary for Attraction?," 889–922.

Who are Our Neighbors?

The next step is learning about the demographic and lifestyle characteristics of the people who live in a congregation's membership and ministry areas. FaithX and Datastory designed an html-based report that provides an interactive snapshot of the population characteristics and community issues within the ministry area, called a Neighborhood Missional Intelligence Report (NMIR). Figure 2 below illustrates how a congregation can be data-blind to unexpected changes in their neighborhood.¹³ In one particular case, a church comprised of mostly the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X congregants learned that their immediate neighborhood was filled with people from Generation Z and Millennials. When shown the data, a lay leader immediately asked, "Why don't we see them?" This then led to a discussion of how hard it is to notice people outside church walls.

Figure 2: Example of NMIR Generational Gap

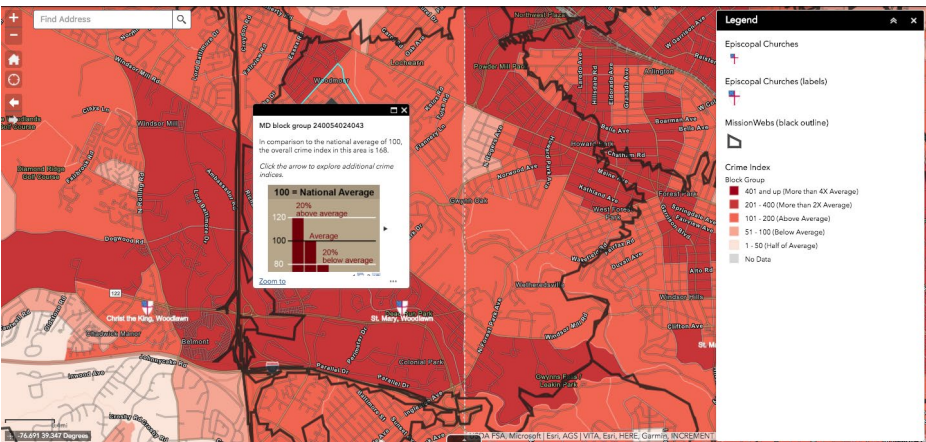


¹³ Cf. Irene Scopelliti et al., "Bias Blind Spot," 2468–86; Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner, "Is Actual Similarity Necessary for Attraction?," 889–922; and Rennhoff and Owens, "Competition and the Strategic Choices of Churches," 152–70.

What are Our Neighborhood's Issues and Opportunities?

One way to study issues confronting people in a particular neighborhood is through GIS mapping. For example, Figure 3 below displays a Crime Index map to illustrate the elevated crime rate around one congregation in Catonsville, Maryland. Crime Index maps report crime statistics for a particular area in relation to the national average (e.g. a Crime Index of 2.5 equates to an annual crime rate that is 250% higher than the national average). A major source of Crime Index data is the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Statistics available through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which breaks down crime into categories of Personal Crime and Property Crime. Each of those categories are then broken down even further into subcategories, such as rape, murder, burglary, and larceny.¹⁴

Figure 3: Crime Index for a Congregation in Catonsville, MD



Another source of information for studying a neighborhood's population characteristics is market segmentation data. Major suppliers of this kind of data (e.g. Esri's Tapestry and Experian's Mosaic) draw on a variety of sources, including the 2010 Census, as well as yearly statistical census updates; the American Community Survey (ACS); Esri's demographic

¹⁴ See Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, 2019), <https://www.ucrdatatool.gov/>.

updates database; Experian's "ConsumerView" databank; and consumer surveys like the GfK MRI's Survey of the American Consumer.

There are obvious correlations between a neighborhood's market segmentation data and its population characteristic and community issues. For instance, a neighborhood's media preference may inform how a church can tailor their outreach communications to the makeup of their neighbors, or a neighborhood's diversity index may inform a congregation of the need to incorporate different languages. GIS mapping can also reveal whether a neighborhood suffers from housing instability, homelessness, or poverty. Significantly, the FaithX Project has studied these correlations in order to provide a summary of a congregation's neighborhood using Esri's Tapestry market segmentation, which is called a Missional Context Report™ (Figure 4 below). These reports summarize how a particular population communicates and uses technology, their level of education, the kind of fellowship and worship style they prefer, the kinds of job skills they possess, their political and theological leanings, the community issues their neighborhood is facing, and how best to engage in outreach with this specific demographic.

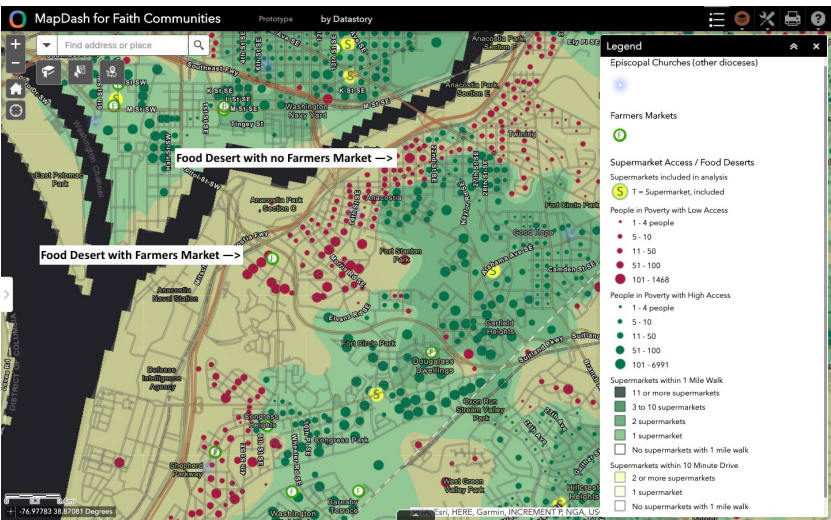
Figure 4: Example Missional Context Report from the FaithX Project



What are Our Neighborhood’s Resources?

While population characteristics and community issues tend to be displayed on the map as aggregated information by census block or census tract, community resources are displayed by their physical location. This means that a congregation can overlay maps of neighborhood issues with relevant local resources, allowing them to identify resource gaps within a congregation’s immediate community. It also allows them to identify resource misalignments about which they might engage in advocacy. For example, Figure 5 below overlays a map of “food desert” gaps for the Anacostia area of Washington, DC (i.e. places where people living in poverty have low access to affordable, healthy food). The map also displays the locations of supermarkets and farmers markets, showing a stark misalignment of food resources where food deserts appear directly adjacent to areas with plentiful access to healthy food. Figure 5 also reveals how a farmers market has recently emerged in one food desert while other food deserts remain barren. Here, a local congregation could organize a farmers market in that region to help bridge the gap.¹⁵

Figure 5: Food Deserts for Anacostia Area of Washington, DC



¹⁵ For a general defense of ministry as science, see Mark Moore, “Theology as a Science: An Historical and Linguistic Approach,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 241–50, <http://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.07>.

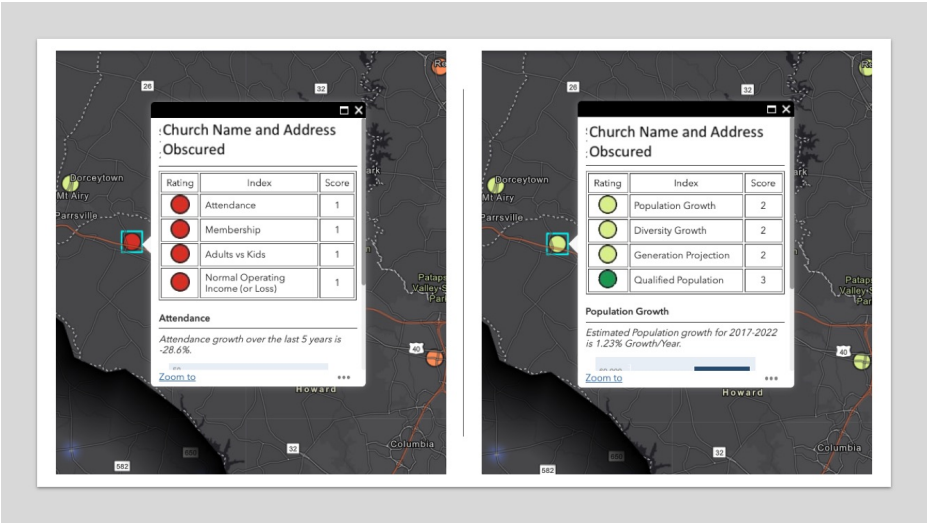
Of course, congregations themselves form part of the web of resources existing in a community. Thus, analytics can be developed to help judicatories evaluate the vitality and sustainability of the various communities it services through its different congregations. A congregational vitality index can be extrapolated from key internal trends, such as membership, attendance, percentage of children, and financial stewardship that are correlated with a healthy congregation.¹⁶ In Figure 6 below, a ministry's vitality analytics (left panel) are best likened to the indicator lights on the dashboard of a car. A green light (a score of 3) means, "Nothing to worry about." Yellow (a score of 2) means, "Warning, have this checked soon." Red (a score of 1) means, "Alert, have this checked now." In the case of this congregation, all the lights are red, which means its ministry's vitality is dangerously low.

Meanwhile, a congregational sustainability index (right panel) can be extrapolated from key external projections that tend to be correlated with emerging missional opportunities, such as population growth, diversity growth, generational predominance, and same-denomination competition. Sustainability analytics are best understood as the quality of a community's soil: green (3) equates to "rich soil for growing ministry"; yellow (2) means, "Ministry could grow reasonably well here with attentive nurture"; and red (1) equates to "seriously rocky or depleted soil—growing ministry here will require a lot of effort and creative gardening."

Comparing congregational vitality to congregational sustainability can show how effective a congregation has been at engaging missional opportunities emerging in its area. Decreasing congregation vitality with increasing projected sustainability indicates significant room for improvement if a congregation is willing to change its approach to serving its neighborhoods. Increasing vitality with decreasing projected sustainability means that while the congregation is performing well now, it may face hard times in the near future. This kind of analysis can help a judicatory triage its congregations by identifying where ministries will likely do well no matter the approach and where congregations are likely to fail no matter what. This information will then allow judicatories to focus time, effort, and financial resources to those ministries that will make the greatest difference.

¹⁶ Kenneth W. Howard, "Congregational Vitality Assessment: A Free Tool for Determining the Health and Sustainability of Faith Communities," FaithX Project, December 7, 2017, <https://faithx.net/congregational-vitality-assessment-free-tool-determining-health-sustainability-faith-communities/>.

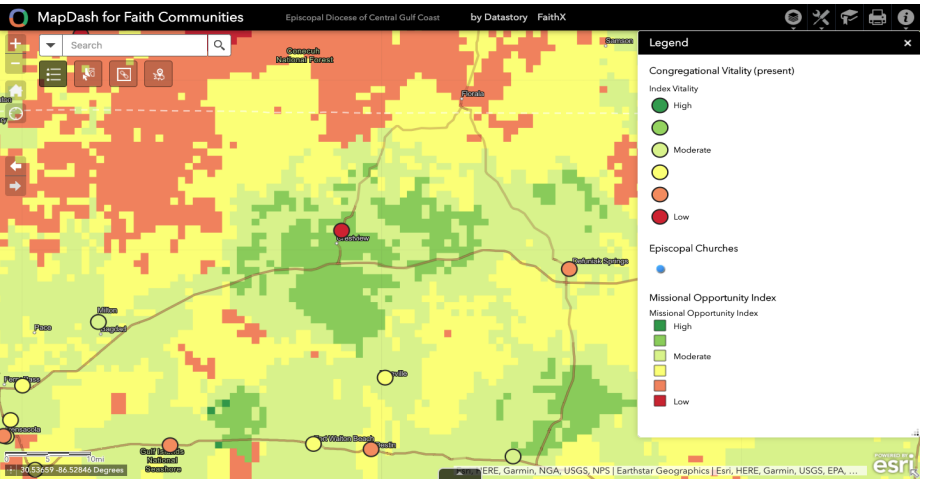
Figure 6: Example of Congregational Vitality/Sustainability Index



Examples of Analytics at Work

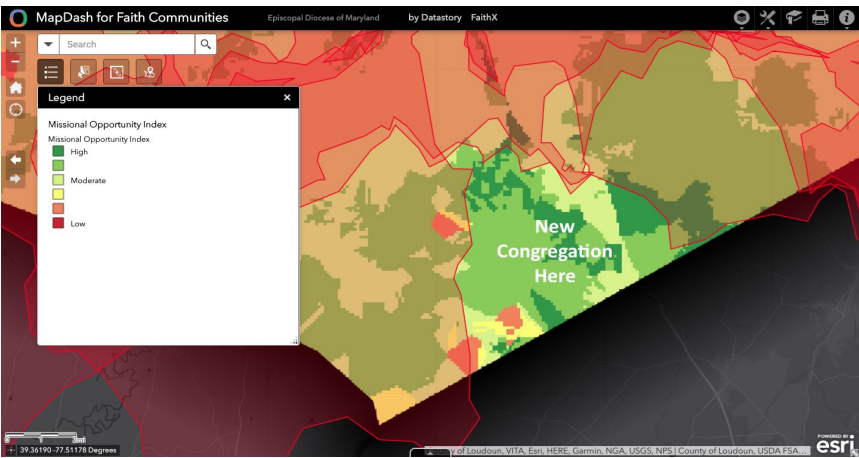
Congregational Redevelopment—Figure 7 illustrates how identifying a low vitality congregation in a high missional opportunity area helped one judicatory reveal ministry opportunities for congregational redevelopment.

Figure 7: Example Congregational Vitality



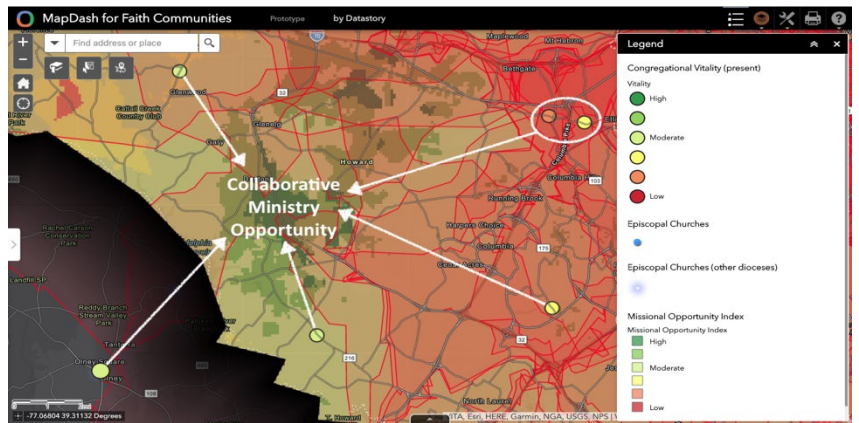
Congregational Startup—Figure 8 below shows how overlaying a Missional Opportunity Index with fifteen-minute drive times helped one judicatory identify a promising site for church plant. Having this information can help speed up the decision-making process for when and where a new congregation should be developed.

Figure 8: Example Missional Opportunity Index



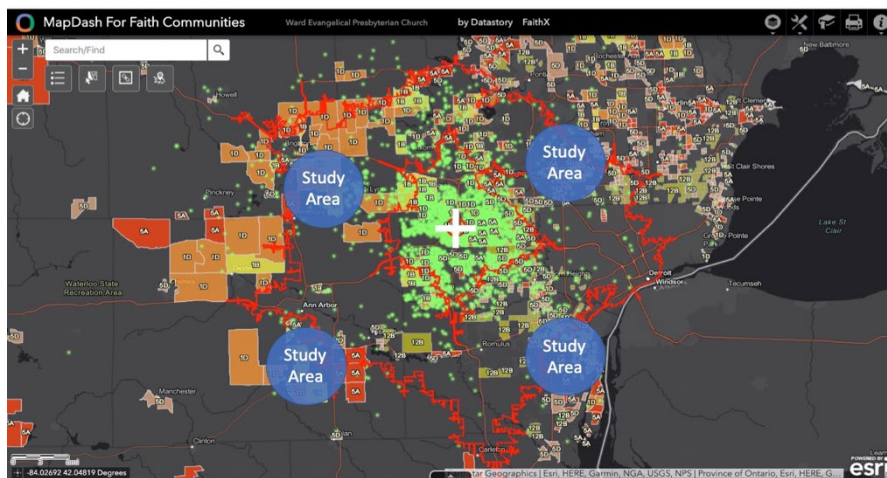
Collaborative Ministry Opportunities—Figure 9 below illustrates how overlaying a Missional Opportunity Index and a Vitality Index helped one judicatory identify areas where already existing congregations might collaboratively engage in local missional opportunities.

Figure 9: Example Missional Opportunity Index with Vitality Index



Attendee Location Analysis—Research has demonstrated that people tend to settle into neighborhoods dominated by people who are most like themselves.¹⁷ Using GIS technology, an Attendee Location Analysis can contrast the dominant population segments in a community with the dominant segments attending a particular congregation to determine potential areas for reaching underrepresented population segments in their neighborhood. Figure 10 below shows how a growing congregation in one Detroit suburb is using Attendee Location Analysis to explore possible sites for a second campus.

Figure 10: Example Attendee Location Analysis



Summary

We have illustrated above a number of powerful ways that GIS technology and market segmentation data can be combined with a demographic analysis of local neighborhoods to support predictive identification of emerging missional opportunities and challenges. The resultant data then shows how already existing and newly developing ministries can effectively and adaptively engage their local communities. The power of these tools lies not in replacing intuitive discernment with data but by grounding the data in real-world stories that allow congregants to see themselves in the larger narrative of their own neighborhoods.

¹⁷ K. Sridhar Moorthy, "Market Segmentation, Self-Selection, and Product Line Design," *Marketing Science* 3, no. 4 (1984): 288–307, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/mksc.3.4.288>.

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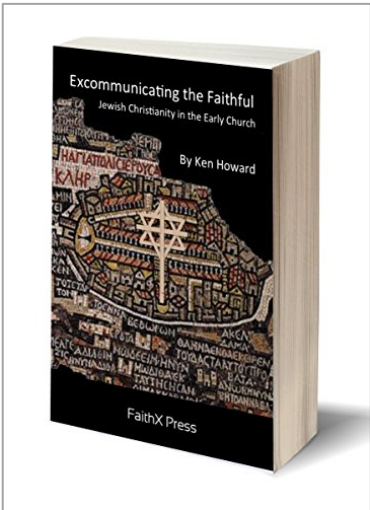
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

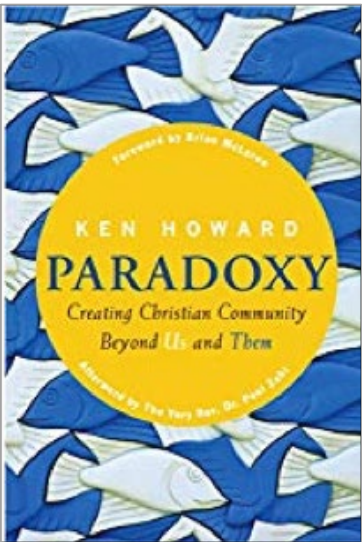
Kenneth W. Howard is an author, strategic missional consultant, church demographer, and church futurist from Germantown, Maryland. Ordained as an Episcopal priest and canonically resident in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, Ken is the founder and executive director of the FaithX Project, a nonprofit consulting and resource development practice serving congregational and judicatory leaders of all faith traditions. He holds a Master of Education from Virginia Commonwealth University and a Master of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary.

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